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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to identify factors associated with young adults' concerns about age related changes in body image and their anticipated impact on psychosocial functioning. One hundred and sixty-seven college students completed the Body Image and Aging Survey, designed to assess age related issues in body image, the Peer Dieting Survey, the Bulimia and Drive for Thinness subscales of the Eating Disorders Inventory II (EDI II), and the Zung Self Rating Depression Inventory. Results indicated significant correlations between the EDI II Bulimia subscale and the perception of future psychosocial functioning, as well as the consideration of surgical and non-surgical procedures to hide the physical signs of aging. Compared to males, females viewed a number of coping strategies as potentially more effective in dealing with changes in appearance, but also believed that age related changes in appearance would be more important in determining body satisfaction. Females were also more likely to consider cosmetic surgery, anti-aging strategies, and natural strategies to resist age related appearance changes. These findings suggest that while both genders have negative expectations about the effects of age related changes in appearance, females perceive aging as having a greater impact on overall attractiveness. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/JDM)

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College Students' Attitudes Towards Age-Related Changes in Physical Appearance

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify factors associated with young adults' concerns about age-related changes in body image and their anticipated impact on psychosocial functioning. One hundred and sixty-seven college students completed the Body Image and Aging Survey, designed to assess age-related issues in body image, the Peer Dieting Survey, the Bulimia and Drive for Thinness subscales of the Eating Disorders Inventory-II (EDI-II), and the Zung Self Rating Depression Inventory. Results indicated significant correlations between the EDI-II Bulimia subscale and the perception of future psychosocial functioning, as well as the consideration of surgical and non-surgical procedures to hide the physical signs of aging. Compared to males, females viewed a number of coping strategies as potentially more effective in dealing with changes in appearance, but also believed that age-related changes in appearance would be more important in determining body satisfaction. Females were also more likely to consider cosmetic surgery, anti-aging strategies, and natural strategies to resist age-related appearance changes. These findings suggest that while both genders have negative expectations about the effects of age-related changes in appearance, females perceive aging as having a greater impact on overall attractiveness.

College Students' Attitudes Towards Age-Related Changes In Physical Appearance

Our physical appearance can affect how we are perceived and treated by society (Brown, Cash, & Noles, 1986). Unfortunately for the elderly, the reflection of age on physical appearance may have negative consequences (Verma, 2000; Whitbourne, 1998). Past research has suggested that the label "senior citizen" is associated with having less to offer society (Bultena & Powers, 1978). As a result, the elderly population may attempt to avoid being viewed as "old" by employing various strategies to maintain a youthful appearance and social acceptance (Agliata, Tantleff-Dunn, & Hernandez, 2000). Negative stereotypes of the elderly may therefore be partially responsible for the increasing popularity of products and cosmetic surgeries that help fight the aging process.

In addition to having a profound impact on the elderly (Birren & Birren, 1990), perceptions of aging and its potential impact on daily functioning has also been the focus of research for young adults. Young adults have not only reported a general fear of aging (Lester, Monfredo, & Hummel, 1979), but have identified physical signs of aging as the source of anxiety and fear (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993). Because of the strong influence body image has on various areas of psychosocial functioning (Thompson et al., 1999), changes in body image due to aging is a cause for concern. It is important for researchers to continue work in this area to identify and address perceptions and fears of aging, as our population will continue to age and struggle to keep a positive self-image. The aim of the current study was to identify factors associated with young adults' concern about age-related changes in physical appearance and to explore gender differences in perceptions of age-related body image changes and their anticipated impact on psychosocial functioning.

Method

Participants

Participants included one hundred sixty-seven college students (117 females, 50 males, *M* = 21.3 years, *SD* = 5.0) at a large open enrollment university in the Southeast. Ethnicity of the sample was predominantly Caucasian (70.1%), followed by Latino (12.0%), African American (6.6%), Asian/Pacific (3.0%), and Native American (1.8%).

Procedure and Measures

Participants completed a survey packet that included the Body Image and Aging Survey (BIAS), designed to assess age-related issues in body image such as the impact of age-related changes on appearance, the strategies used to slow or hide the physical signs of aging, and the thought processes associated with aging. The packet also contained the Peer Dieting Survey (Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994) to assess perceptions of friends' interest in dieting, weight, and body image; the Eating Disorders Inventory-II Bulimia and Drive for Thinness Subscales (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983) to assess levels of eating disturbance; and the Zung Self Rating Depression Inventory (Zung, 1965).

Results

Peer dieting was significantly correlated with the likelihood of using age-reversing or camouflaging strategies such as hair color and makeup in the future (r =.441, p<.01). Peer dieting was also significantly correlated with perceptions that age-related changes in appearance will lead to decreased satisfaction with looks (r =.375, p<.01). There were also several significant correlations between the EDI Bulimia Subscale and future consideration of cosmetic surgery (r =.312, p<.01), likelihood of comparing ones appearance to others (r =.371, p<.01), anticipation of decreased psychosocial functioning in the older years (r =.406, p<.01) , and likely

use of age-reversing products in the future (r =.369, p<.01). The individual subscales of the BIAS, which focus on the overall importance that future body image changes will have in determining appearance satisfaction, the impact of these changes, consideration of cosmetic surgery, and likelihood of using anti-aging products, were all significantly correlated.

Compared to males, females believed that age-related changes in appearance, such as graying hair, wrinkles, and increased body fat will be more important in determining overall body satisfaction, t = -3.0, p < .01. Women were also more likely to consider cosmetic surgery (t = -2.7, p < .01), and to use anti-aging strategies such as hair color and makeup (t = -10.2, p <.01) as well as natural strategies such as exercising and maintaining a healthy diet (t = -2.6, p < .01) to hide the physical signs of aging. Women also viewed a number of coping strategies, such as having a sense of humor, as potentially more effective in dealing with changes in appearance, t = -3.8, p < .01.

Discussion

These findings suggest that both genders have negative expectations about the effects of age-related changes in appearance, but females perceive aging as having a greater impact on overall attractiveness. This may reflect the stringent sociocultural standards for females' attractiveness, which typically include a thin, toned body. For many women, this ideal is inconsistent with aging.

It is possible that the prevalence of peer dieting and discussion about body size among young adults may make the prospect of aging rather threatening. Their current concern with weight and shape coupled with fears of aging may make this population likely consumers of age reversing/concealing products and procedures. Further, the relationships between eating disorder symptomotology, future consideration of cosmetic surgery, and a high degree of peer

comparison, mark the considerable importance of social influence and pressure to maintain an ideal (i.e., youthful) image.

In general, both genders reported that in the future their body image will be much more central to their happiness and psychosocial functioning than it is currently. Not only are physical changes in appearance expected to have a negative impact, but young adults also anticipate that strategies to cope with these changes will be only slightly to moderately effective. With the graying of America before us, it is important to further explore the impact of aging and effective ways of coping with this inevitable process. A better understanding of gender-specific as well as universal concerns about aging may facilitate efforts to help the rapidly growing number of older adults accept and adjust to the natural changes of aging in a culture that idealizes youth and devalues the elderly.

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